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## THE GOOD CAUSE ACCOUNT OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

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**ABSTRACT:** I defend the theory that one's life is meaningful to the extent that one promotes the good. Call this the good cause account (GCA) of the meaning of life. It holds that the good effects that count towards the meaning of one's life need not be intentional. Nor must one be aware of the effects. Nor does it matter whether the same good would have resulted if one had not existed. What matters is that one is causally responsible for the good. I argue that the best theory of the meaning of life should clearly distinguish between subjective fulfillment and objective meaningfulness. The GCA respects the distinction. And it is superior to its leading rivals in the recent literature, most notably those of Erik Wielenberg and Susan Wolf.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Few would deny that Gandhi's life is more meaningful than one spent making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, collecting rubber bands, counting the blades of grass on Harvard Yard, or consuming large quantities of excrement. This is a core datum that any theory of the meaning of life must respect on pain of radical revisionism. I offer a normative theory of the meaning of life, an axiological theory for evaluating lives. I call it the good cause account (GCA) of the meaning of life. The general theory is straightforward: one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good.<sup>1</sup> With suitable

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<sup>1</sup> We will likely want to distinguish between far distant transient causes and genuine, relevant causes. I am reluctant to say that the copulation responsible for my birth was a cause

clarification, I think that this is the correct view of the meaning of life. I intend to defend such a view here.

The good cause account is an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. It identifies the meaningfulness of one's life in the objective good that one causes. This view is distinct from subjectivist accounts of the meaning of life. Subjectivist theories hold that fulfillment or some other subjective state is what makes a life meaningful. On such views, one's life is meaningful if one finds it meaningful or, we might say, fulfilling. I argue that we should reject this style of theory. Further, I argue that we should reject any view of the meaning of life that includes a necessary subjective condition. The GCA holds that meaningfulness is not constituted by the reactions of the one living the life.

My argument proceeds in a few steps. The bulk of the effort is devoted to defending the general contours of the good cause account. I begin by sorting out some of the conceptual terrain. First, I draw a distinction between welfare and the meaning of life. Then I develop a defense of the good cause account of the meaning of life in response to the problems facing a few other theories.<sup>2</sup> I argue against both subjectivist theories and hybrid theories—those that include both objective and subjective conditions. I show the relative virtues of the good cause account over two of the most compelling theories in the current literature, those offered by Erik Wielenberg and Susan Wolf.<sup>3</sup> Finally, after defending the major commitments of objectivist theories of the meaning of life, I respond to several novel objections to objectivist theories of meaning. Most important, I offer reasons to reject a problematic refinement. In the process, I suggest a few options for a more precise formulation of the good cause account.

## 2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

I am approaching the subject of the meaning of life as a mode of evaluating lives. Hence, I am not trying to offer a descriptive theory of a psychological state, such as fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> I am interested in the evaluative concept of meaningfulness. This is a kind of value that is conceptually distinct from several

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of my stubbing my toe this morning. The copulation does not seem relevant. The CGA will likely require a far more restricted notion of "cause," than one that would count my birth. However, it is far out of scope to develop a theory of causation here.

<sup>2</sup> Given limitations of scope, my discussion cannot be comprehensive. This is not a survey article. For an overview of the literature, see Metz (2002, 2005, and 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Wolf (1997 and 2010) and Wielenberg (2005).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the evaluative notion will not make reference to psychological states. Haybron (2010) makes a similar distinction in regard to happiness. The evaluative notion tracks

other ways in which a life might be good.<sup>5</sup> When assessing the meaning of a life, we attribute to the life a degree of a certain kind of value—that of meaningfulness. Lives that are below a threshold of this kind of value are meaningless, or worse, they might have anti-meaning or negative meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Many people want their lives to be meaningful, to have positive meaning. Viktor Frankl goes so far as to claim that the desire for meaning is the primary motivational force in humans.<sup>7</sup> He calls the drive “the will to meaning.” Although Frankl may go too far, there is no denying that many people are concerned with the meaningfulness of their lives. Meaningfulness is the kind of value that comes into view upon deathbed reflection, where we wonder about the significance of our lives.<sup>8</sup> Think of Ivan Ilych’s deathbed turmoil. Of course, meaning is not the only thing one might worry about. Deathbed concerns are not confined to thoughts about meaning, as one might also regret not having had enough fun. Nevertheless, the cliché gets something right: we do not merely want to live happy lives, but meaningful lives as well.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the kind of value we are concerned with appears to be distinct from that of prudential value.<sup>10</sup> The two concerns can come apart. We can readily picture lives that are low in prudential value but high in meaningfulness.<sup>11</sup> Simply imagine a happy life devoted to trivial amusements. Such a life is plausibly good for the one who lives it, but not very meaningful. The inverse is scarcely implausible. Of course, this is controversial. It depends on whether or not meaning can directly affect how good a life is for the one who lives it. Since the theory of the meaning of life that I defend does not rely on the claim

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what is better called well-being. The descriptive concept is that of a psychological state—happiness. I will return to this distinction later.

<sup>5</sup> Feldman (2006, 8–12) lists 5 ways in which lives can be good: morally, causally, aesthetically, exemplarily, and prudentially. Sumner (1996, 20–25) distinguishes between four kinds of value: aesthetic, perfectionist, ethical, and prudential.

<sup>6</sup> It is not clear what label we should give to the opposite of meaningfulness. I will typically call it negative meaning. Alternatively, we might call it “anti-meaning” or “antimatter,” as Metz (2005, 806) suggests. Unless otherwise noted, when I say “meaning” I mean positive meaning.

<sup>7</sup> Frankl (1959, 99).

<sup>8</sup> It is fairly common to motivate the concern this way. See Frankl (1959, 117), Metz (2001, 147), Wolf (2010, 8), and Wielenberg (2005). In contrast, Sumner (1996, 22 and 24) uses a deathbed test to raise thoughts about welfare. The deathbed test suffers from similar problems as the crib test for isolating concerns about welfare: imagine looking into your child’s crib. What you want for it is what is in the child’s good. The problem for the test is that a parent might have desires for their child’s future that are not based on the child’s welfare. For instance, a religious fanatic may want it to become a suicide bomber. See Feldman (2006, 9–10) and Bradley (2009, 2–3) for a discussion of the crib test. Adams (1999, 97) proposes a similar test.

<sup>9</sup> This is Wolf’s (2010b) central thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf (1997, 2010a, and 2010b) builds her theory around the difference between well-being and meaning. As does Audi (2005, 342–3).

<sup>11</sup> Due to limitations of scope, I’m eliding many subtleties. Here, I assume our everyday notion of happiness, not some alien theory of eudemonia. No matter, I don’t mean to assume or deny that self-interest is merely a matter of subjective happiness.

that meaning does not directly affect welfare, I will not provide much defense here. But it will help to explain the proposed distinction between welfare and meaning in a bit more detail.

Theories of prudential value (also known as “well-being,” “welfare,” and “self-interest”) tell us what makes a life good for the one who lives it. Well-being is conceptually distinct from many other ways in which a life may be good. For instance, a life of self-sacrifice spent working for the poor might be both morally and instrumentally good, in that it benefits the needy, but it is not necessarily good for the one who lives it. We do not intend to benefit ourselves through self-sacrifice. This is precisely what makes it self-sacrifice. Although it is almost always morally good to sacrifice one’s own good for the good of others, it is almost never, or at least not necessarily, intrinsically prudentially good.<sup>12</sup>

A leading theory of welfare called “mental statism” holds that the sole bearers of intrinsic prudential value are mental states.<sup>13</sup> Hedonism, for instance, is a specific type of mental statism that counts only the mental states of pleasure and pain.<sup>14</sup> Most controversially, mental statism implies what is known as the experience requirement—the claim that what you do not experience cannot hurt you.<sup>15</sup> There is a fairly wide consensus, although not without dissenting opinion, that experience machine-style examples show that mental statism is false.<sup>16</sup>

The most compelling counter-example to mental statism is Nozick’s experience machine.<sup>17</sup> Nozick asks us to imagine a machine that would be able to simulate a wide array of fantastic experiences. The experiment gives us, what is by now, a familiar sales pitch: perhaps you want to write the great American novel. In the experience machine you can have the experience of writing the most celebrated novel in history. Your work will be praised far and wide.

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<sup>12</sup> Desire satisfaction theories of well-being seem to imply that self-sacrifice is impossible. See Overvold (1980) for a forceful presentation of the issue. Heathwood (2011) defends a solution.

<sup>13</sup> Kagan (1994 and 1992) confesses his temptation toward mental statism. He argues for the claim that to have an effect on a person’s well-being, something must have an effect on the intrinsic properties of the person. He later (2009, 771, n.3) recants.

<sup>14</sup> Parfit (1984) and Wolf (1997) reverse this distinction. They seem to hold that all forms of mental statism are forms of hedonism.

<sup>15</sup> Griffin (1986, 13). Since the experience requirement is not always presented in the same way, I have chosen to focus on mental statism. Soll (1998), for instance, defends a theory called experientialism that has both motivational and broad axiological implications. Mental statism, as I have formulated it, implies only a limited axiological claim about well-being: something can affect someone’s well-being only if it makes an experiential difference for that person.

<sup>16</sup> Nozick’s (1974, 42–5) “Experience Machine,” Nagel’s (1993, 64) “Deceived Businessman,” Nagel’s (1993, 66) “Contented Infant,” Mill’s (2002) “Pig,” and Nozick’s (1997) “Mongolian Pornographer” are the most pressing thought experiments in opposition to mental statism.

<sup>17</sup> Nozick (1974, 42–5).

Champion athlete, war hero, legendary lover, you name it—in the machine, you will experience any life that you desire. Most important, life in the machine will seem as real as any experience that you have ever had. You will never know the difference.

Nozick asks us whether given the chance we would step into the machine. Except for a couple of undergraduates, all the people I've asked say that they would decline. Most of them opt out of the machine because they do not merely want to think that they have written the great American novel; they want to write it. They do not merely want to think that they have genuine relationships; they want to form genuine bonds with others. They like to win, but they do not want every game to be fixed in their favor.

Perhaps the frivolous and the terminally ill might plug in, but most of the people that I've talked to opt out of a life in the experience machine. I see no reason to think this reaction is aberrant. And I see no reason to think that their repulsion to life in the machine is mistaken. Nevertheless, Nozick's scenario does not constitute a decisive objection to mental statism. Yes, the thought experiment clearly shows that we want more than mere experiences, but it does not show that things without experiential impact can affect our well-being. The thought experiment merely confirms what we already knew: we desire many things other than our own well-being.<sup>18</sup> Strict psychological egoism is highly implausible. We often non-selfishly desire the good of others. People frequently sacrifice themselves for a cause or for the benefit of those they love. And many people have been known to sacrifice their own well-being for other kinds of goods, such as truth, contact with reality, moral worth, and meaningfulness.

Sometimes we rationally hold the meaning of our life in greater esteem than our own good. Achilles' choice illustrates the point. Achilles knew that if he entered the battle against the Trojans, he would die soon, but that his name would live on for ages; however, if he stayed out of the fight, his name would be forgotten, but his life would be long and happy. He chose a short meaningful life over a long life high in individual welfare. He was not merely motivated by a desire for fame, but for achievement and, more significantly, revenge for Hector's slaying of Patroclus.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of whether we think

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<sup>18</sup> In defense of mental statism, Haslett (1990) appeals to this distinction, as do Goldsworthy (1992), Bradley (2009, 10), Kawall (1999), and Feldman (2012, 67–72). For additional discussion of this line of argument, see Tännsjö (1998, 111–12) and Sumner (1996, 96–7).

<sup>19</sup> It is not clear whether a desire for posthumous fame is self-interested. When it is, we are likely confused.

that glory on the battlefield is a “project of worth,” given his values, Achilles’ decision was eminently rational.<sup>20</sup> It is perfectly rational to care about our lives and not just our welfare.<sup>21</sup>

Most seem to think that a life in the experience machine would be meaningless. Insofar as we desire meaningfulness, we will opt out of the machine.<sup>22</sup> This does not show that we think that we would be better off—that we would have a higher state of welfare—outside of the machine. Life in the machine simply cannot give us everything that we want. Since we want more than what merely increases our well-being, the case against mental statism is inconclusive.

I do not pretend that this brief consideration of the experience machine objection is a decisive reply. Regardless of whether the experience machine objection refutes mental statism about welfare, it has important implications for theories of the meaning of life. Although some think that you could live a life high in prudential value inside the experience machine, few think that you could live a meaningful life inside the machine.<sup>23</sup> At least this much is clear.

The difference in intuitions shows that there is a conceptual difference between meaning and well-being. If they were conceptually identical, it is hard to see how we could be less certain about how meaningful a life could be in the experience machine than about how high in welfare such a life could be. But many people are indeed far less certain about one than the other. Perhaps the set of lives high in meaning will be identical to the set of lives high in welfare. I doubt it, but either way, there is a conceptual difference. The two concepts are not the same.

I turn now to show how the experience machine helps eliminate an entire category of theories of the meaning of life—subjectivist theories.

### 3. SUBJECTIVIST THEORIES

Subjectivist theories of the meaning of life hold that what makes a life meaningful is purely a matter of how that life seems to the one who lives it. These theories are mental statist theories of the meaning of life. Richard

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<sup>20</sup> Wolf (1997, 2010a, and 2010b) argues that meaning in a life is a result of active engagement in projects of worth.

<sup>21</sup> Kagan (1992 and 1994) makes a distinction between me and my life. I think that this is best expressed in terms of different kinds of value. Our lives can have value for us, and they can also have instrumental, aesthetic, and moral value. Unfortunately Kagan’s distinction is rarely, if ever, noted in the meaning of life literature. For instance, Metz does not cite either paper in his numerous surveys.

<sup>22</sup> Other desires will suffice, such as the desire for contact with reality. A desire for meaning is not the only thing that can motivate repulsion at the experience machine.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Metz (2002, 803; 2003, 313; and 2007, 208) agrees.

Taylor provides a classic defense of such a view.<sup>24</sup> He develops a theory of the meaning of life through an additive procedure: first identify a clearly meaningless life. Then try adding to it. When you add something that makes the life meaningful, you will have found the sufficient conditions for meaningfulness.<sup>25</sup>

Taylor's first step is to identify a clearly meaningless life. He picks Sisyphus, who is condemned to eternal, meaningless toil—each day he must roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down when he approaches the top. Clearly, in the myth of Sisyphus we find a meaningless life. He is grudgingly engaged in a pointless task. His life is meaningless. In search of sufficient conditions for meaningfulness, Taylor suggests two general strategies for remedying the deficiency. We could either (1) give Sisyphus's activity a valuable result, have it result in an enduring accomplishment, or (2) we could change his attitude toward his task. Taylor rejects the first and defends the second approach.

The first strategy might appear to be promising. It seems that Sisyphus's life is meaningless because his activity leads to nothing. Rolling a stone up a hill endlessly is a pointless task. Sisyphus is no better than a hamster running in a wheel. Accordingly, one might think that the meaninglessness of his life is solely a result of the meaninglessness of his project. If only the stone rolling had a purpose. Taylor asks us to imagine a revised version of the myth where Sisyphus is able to round the peak of the hill and assemble his daily rocks into a glorious cathedral. His stone rolling would now have a point. It would produce something of enduring value. Surely this would make his life meaningful. He would have left his mark on the world.

The problem, Taylor argues, is that this option is not available to us. Our accomplishments simply do not endure:

Our achievements, even though they are often beautiful, are mostly bubbles; and those that do last, like the sand swept pyramids, soon become mere curiosities while around the rest of mankind continues its perpetual toting of rocks, only to see them roll down.<sup>26</sup>

To see why, we need not appeal to a grand cosmic time frame of a few billion years. Sure, in a few billion years all human accomplishments will be obliterated when the sun burns out and sucks our solar system into a black hole. But we do not need to wait so long. How many human accomplishments last more than a few generations? How many fewer last for a few

<sup>24</sup> Taylor (2008). He later rejected purely subjective theories.

<sup>25</sup> Wolf (2010a, 796) adopts the same strategy.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor (2008, 139).

thousand years? Not even one in ten thousand. Hence, we should give up on the futile attempt to make our lives meaningful through enduring accomplishments. Taylor suggests another option. He asks us to imagine yet another version of the Sisyphus myth: in this version the gods give Sisyphus the desire to do nothing but roll stones. Now we find Sisyphus fulfilled. He has all the time in the world to do nothing but what he most wants to do. What joy! The gods, Taylor argues, have given Sisyphus an incredible gift—they made his life meaningful.

Taylor claims to have identified a sufficient condition for meaningfulness, a condition that is happily within our reach. It's fulfillment.<sup>27</sup> He offers a purely subjectivist theory. Whether one's life is meaningful is entirely a matter of how meaningful one finds it. There is no objective fact of the matter, apart from how fulfilling we find our lives. There is an objective fact of the matter of about one's level of fulfillment. But the theory holds that the meaningfulness of a life is constitutively dependent on one's response to that life. On this theory no lives are objectively any more or less meaningful than others.<sup>28</sup> They all lead to the same result: nothing. Meaning is subjective.<sup>29</sup> Fulfillment is all we need to lead a meaningful life.

I think we should be suspicious of every step of Taylor's argument, but I will hold off on the details. Rather than assessing the argument, we can see that the theory is wrong because of its implications. Purely subjective theories have absurd implications. We have already seen the first absurdity: subjectivist theories of the meaning of life imply that one could live a meaningful life in the experience machine. More specifically, they imply that a life devoted to curing cancer in the machine could be more meaningful than a similar life outside the machine. It would be more meaningful if the person in the machine felt a higher degree of fulfillment. But this is absurd. It is pointless to devote oneself to curing cancer inside the experience machine. There are no cancer victims in the machine; there are only simulations. Sure, it might be morally good to pursue the cure in the machine. And there might be some achievement value to solving intellectual puzzles in the machine. But no good would result from a machine cure.

Similarly, purely subjectivist theories cannot appropriately distinguish between actual lives. Taylor's theory implies that any two equally fulfilling lives are equally meaningful, even if one is devoted to curing cancer and the

<sup>27</sup> Wolf (2010b) calls Taylor's theory the "fulfillment theory."

<sup>28</sup> This is why I call Taylor's theory a subjectivist theory. This usage is fairly standard in the literature. See Metz (2002, 792). Brogaard and Smith (2005, 444) carve up the terrain differently, into internalist and externalist theories.

<sup>29</sup> Huemer (2005, 2–3) develops this notion of "subjective."



other is devoted to consuming vast quantities of excrement.<sup>30</sup> But a grinning excrement eater does not live as meaningful of a life as a cancer researcher. It is absurd to suggest otherwise. Hence, we should reject the subjective theory. It is radically out of touch with our concept of meaningfulness.<sup>31</sup>

A fictional example will help secure the objection. Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) gives us an excellent reason to reject the subjective theory. The movie tells what is now a familiar story of a suicidal man, George Bailey (James Stewart), who is finally able to see the meaning of his life with a little help from a friend—an alcoholic angel who wants to make good. The angel takes George on a trip to Pottersville—the alternate world where George had never been born. A few hours in Pottersville is enough for George to see how meaningful his existence has been. The problem for the subjectivist theory is this: the theory implies that no one can be wrong about how meaningful or meaningless they find their life. If one finds it fulfilling, it is meaningful. But George Bailey's despair gives us excellent reason to reject such a view. On his dark night of the soul, George mistakenly thought that his life was meaningless because the family business was likely to fail under his stewardship. The bank's collapse would indeed be a tremendous failure, but George was wrong to think that his life would be meaningless as a result. His merely thinking it so does not make his life meaningless. The trip to Pottersville helps George see his mistake. His despair was based on an incorrect assessment of the value of his life.

We can be right or wrong about these things. George was wrong and so, conversely, is Sisyphus fulfilled. Sure, someone might feel fulfilled eating buckets of excrement or endlessly rolling rocks up a hill, but that does not mean that fulfillment is appropriate to either life. Fulfillment is not sufficient for meaning.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. HYBRID THEORIES

Hybrid theories of the meaning of life try to capture the importance of both feelings of fulfillment and its objective appropriateness. They have both subjective and objective conditions. One of the most plausible hybrid theories

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<sup>30</sup> Wielenberg (2005, 22) names the example the “grinning excrement eater.” Cottingham (2003, 23) asks us to imagine the life of a dedicated torturer working for an evil dictator.

<sup>31</sup> See Metz (2002, 795) for further references into the large literature criticizing Taylor's subjectivist theory.

<sup>32</sup> Hooker (2008, 192) argues that self-benefit can contribute to the meaning of life. Hence, “there is a subjectivist sufficient condition for the agent's life having at least some meaning.” Hooker is operating with a different notion of “subjective.” Most plausibly, self-benefit is objectively good on my notion of objectivity.

is that developed by Susan Wolf. Wolf argues that one's life is made meaningful through active engagement in projects of worth.<sup>33</sup> She calls her theory the fitting fulfillment view. To put it in slogan form, the view holds that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. The slogan emphasizes two important conditions: (1) subjective attraction, and (2) the objective value of the pursuit. The first condition captures what is appealing about the purely subjective view. Fulfillment appears to be a necessary condition on living a meaningful life. But unlike purely subjectivist views, hybrid views do not hold that fulfillment is sufficient. Since this was the chief source of trouble for Taylor's subjectivist theory, the fitting fulfillment view escapes the main problems facing its subjectivist rival. Wolf's hybrid view is neither vulnerable to experience machine style objections, nor to the grinning excrement eater *reductio ad absurdum*. The fitting fulfillment view correctly implies that the grinning excrement eater lives a meaningless life. The project of devouring heaping piles of excrement is not a project of worth. It is not a fitting object of fulfillment.

At this point, the defender of the subjective theory might object that the fitting fulfillment view implies something equally counter-intuitive. Just as the critics charged that the purely subjectivist view cannot distinguish between more and less meaningful lives of equal levels of fulfillment, the fitting fulfillment view also implies that the life of a cancer researcher is equally meaningful as that of the grinning excrement eater. This is because neither is engaged in a project of worth. No one can be. Curing cancer is no more objectively valuable than eating excrement. One might press this charge based on two types of considerations.<sup>34</sup> First, one might argue that there is no objective value. This is the position of the nihilist. I will put this line of argument aside for now and consider it along with a few other objections.

Second, one might argue that curing cancer is no more objectively valuable than eating excrement, since the ultimate outcome of both is the same: the ultimate outcome is a cold, lifeless entropic universe.<sup>35</sup> Bertrand Russell puts it succinctly:

all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar

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<sup>33</sup> Wolf (2010b, 9).

<sup>34</sup> I want to put aside all issues concerning supernatural sources of meaning. It's not clear that supernatural meaning helps at all. Merely being part of God's plan does little for us, unless the plan is good. It appears that goodness is fundamental. For a survey of the literature on supernatural meaning, see Metz (2002, 783–792).

<sup>35</sup> Wielenberg (2005, 16) calls this the "final outcome argument." I can only give it a cursory hearing.

system, and [ . . . ] the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.<sup>36</sup>

The final outcome of all human actions is worthless. And nothing can be good if its ultimate outcome is worthless. Hence, no human activities are any better than any others. Accordingly, the fitting fulfillment view faces the same problems as the purely subjective view.

Similar considerations lead Taylor to reject an objective component to the meaning of life. Taylor gives us good reason to think that the meaning of life cannot come from enduring accomplishments, since nothing we do will endure for long at all. But this does not give us any reason to think that all projects are of equal worth. Why would it? The argument against the fitting fulfillment theory contains a wildly implausible premise. There is no reason to think that the value of an activity is entirely determined by its ultimate outcome. Certainly there is value in making someone laugh, even if they do not laugh forever. Surely there is value in providing a hot meal for the hungry, even if they are not satiated for all eternity. And surely it is good to cure cancer, even if humanity does not endure until the end of time. These claims are far more secure than any premise in the final outcome argument.<sup>37</sup> Something need not be permanent in order to be valuable while it exists. As Paul Edwards notes, to think otherwise is to exhibit an irrational, arbitrary preference for the distant future.<sup>38</sup>

Although the fitting fulfillment view escapes the worry from final outcomes, it is still not clear that we should accept the theory. Once again, *It's a Wonderful Life* helps us see a significant problem. This time the problem is for hybrid theories. In his moment of despair, George Bailey thought his life's work had come to naught. He felt like an abject failure. But, as noted above, he was wrong.<sup>39</sup> The failure of the family bank would certainly be a significant loss; however, it would not sap his life of positive meaning. Just look at how much good George did for the people in his town. Although George could not see it, his life was indeed meaningful. This is why the trip to Pottersville was useful. It helps correct his incorrect assessment of the meaning of his life.

The problem for the hybrid theory is just this: if George had not been shaken out of his mistaken evaluation, if his guardian angel had not given him

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<sup>36</sup> Russell (2008, 56).

<sup>37</sup> Seachris (2011, 157) offers some support of the core considerations of the final outcome argument.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards (2008, 121). In addition, both Wielenberg (2005, 29) and Wolf (2010b) make this point. Nagel (2008) seems to raise a similar objection. Wielenberg raises several problems for the final outcome argument.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Hooker (2008, 193–4) argues that deathbed re-evaluations show that we can be wrong about the meaningfulness of our lives.

a glimpse of Pottersville, George's life would still have been meaningful. He would not have realized it. In fact, he probably would have killed himself. Indeed, he would have died without a sense of fulfillment. But this would not make his life meaningless; it was high in meaning either way.<sup>40</sup> George just could not see it in his moment of despair. Since, in this unfortunate scenario, George lived a meaningful life that was without feelings of fulfillment, the fitting fulfillment theory is wrong. Similar considerations give us good reason to reject any hybrid theory. No matter the subjective condition, we can imagine a case where someone lacks the subjective condition but nevertheless lives a meaningful life. Hence, there is no necessary subjective condition on the meaning of life. We should reject both subjectivist and hybrid theories of the meaning of life. Any viable theory will be a purely objectivist theory.

## 5. OBJECTIVIST THEORIES

In the previous two sections I argue against both subjectivist and hybrid theories of the meaning of life. Subjectivist theories have the absurd implication that a life in the experience machine is more meaningful than any less subjectively fulfilling life outside the machine. The most prominent hybrid theories mistakenly assume that fulfillment is a necessary condition for living a meaningful life. Such views have trouble accounting for the fact that one can live a meaningful life, but mistakenly think otherwise. George Bailey lived a meaningful life despite his discontent. I turn now to a defense of a purely objectivist theory. I argue that objectivist theories avoid the problems of subjectivist and hybrid views.

Consider once again *It's a Wonderful Life*: the fact that George was mistaken about the meaningfulness of his life prior to his visit to Pottersville supports an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. It is not the case that George's life suddenly became meaningful when he revised his assessment. No, his life was meaningful regardless of his subjective feelings of fulfillment. Hence, I do not see why we should include a subjective condition in the analysis of the meaning of life. Whether one's life is meaningful is an objective matter of fact. It does not hinge on one's level of fulfillment. Fulfillment is one thing; meaning is another. We hope to be appropriately fulfilled, as Wolf notes, but why muddy the waters by blurring two distinct concepts?

Our conversational tendency to interchange the terms "significance" and "meaning" speaks against the hybrid theory.<sup>41</sup> When people voice concerns

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<sup>40</sup> The harmful effects of his suicide mostly likely would have a negative impact on the meaningfulness of his life.

<sup>41</sup> Metz (2001, 138) also notes that "significance" and "meaning" are often substitutable.

about the meaningfulness of their life, they might say things such as: “My life is insignificant.” “I want to do something that matters.” Hybrid theories of meaningfulness do not allow for a clean substitution. If one substitutes the fitting fulfillment view of meaning for “insignificant” in “My life is insignificant,” the meaning changes. When someone worries that their existence is insignificant, they are not merely worried that they are not fulfilled. That is secondary. They are worried that their life lacks a certain kind of value. This is the source of concern, not the mere dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction is a result of the evaluation. The truth of the evaluation is what matters. Hybrid theories incorrectly suggest otherwise. However, objectivist theories have no such problem. In this regard, they are in better accord with this aspect of common usage. This is not a decisive consideration in favor of objectivist theories, but it is a virtue. Given the problem facing subjectivist and hybrid theories, this consideration merely helps shift the burden of proof in favor of objectivist theories.

The general objectivist theory that I prefer is suggested in the common concern people have for significance. We want to do good. Indeed. George’s life is meaningful because he is responsible for lots of good. That’s what makes a life meaningful. Earlier I gave this theory the label “the good cause account” (GCA). It holds that one’s life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good.<sup>42</sup> There are a variety of difficult details that a fully fleshed-out theory will have to specify. For instance, the theory will have to say whether the prevention of the bad counts in favor of meaningfulness. In addition, it will have to specify whether the results that count in favor of meaningfulness must be intentional, or if accidental and non-intentional effects are relevant. Most difficult, it must also specify the relative importance of various kinds of goods that matter, such as achievement, moral worth, perfectionist value, and aesthetic value.<sup>43</sup> This last issue is largely beyond the scope of this paper. But I will attempt to address the other questions in what follows. In order to achieve a slightly more satisfying level of precision, it will help to first contrast the general good cause account with another theory, that of Erik Wielenberg.

Wielenberg defends a theory that might be classified under the hybrid category, though it is objectivist at the core.<sup>44</sup> He offers a neo-Aristotelian theory. It holds that the meaning of life is to be found in intrinsically valuable

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<sup>42</sup> Audi (2005, 343) sketches a theory with some similarities: “a life is meaningful on the basis of the good that is realized in it or the good created by it.”

<sup>43</sup> This is an instance of the “ranking problem” that faces any pluralist theory of value. Like Ross, I know of no algorithm.

<sup>44</sup> He says that he is offering a theory of “internal meaning.” I will return to his proposed distinction between “internal” and “external” meaning.

activities.<sup>45</sup> Wielenberg's theory is objectivist in nature, since it holds that the value of a life is determined by the objective value of the activities one engages in. He suggests that we can determine the objective value of activities through an isolation test: ask whether the activity would be worth engaging in apart from its consequences. If so, it is intrinsically valuable. Here are some activities that he thinks pass the test: falling in love, experiencing pleasure, engaging in intellectually stimulating activity, and being creative.<sup>46</sup>

There are a variety of concerns that one might have about Wielenberg's theory. In particular, there is a significant problem made apparent by taking a closer look at the items on his list. Consider teaching: perhaps teaching is an intrinsically valuable activity. Perhaps it would pass the isolation test. Neither is clear to me. What is clear is that the value of teaching is largely a matter of its effectiveness. And the effectiveness of teaching is largely a matter of its results: learning. I agree that teaching can contribute to the meaningfulness of the life of the teacher, but not because it is intrinsically valuable, but because it is instrumentally valuable. I see no reason to think otherwise.

The principal problem with Wielenberg's theory is in its core formulation. The theory counts only intrinsically valuable activities towards the meaningfulness of one's life, but this is far too restrictive. Why should we exclude instrumentally valuable activities that have intrinsically good results? Perhaps under some strained description George's activities at the bank were intrinsically valuable. But much of what counts towards the meaningfulness of his life is not in the activities themselves, but in their results. Running a bank may have some intrinsic achievement value. But it can also be of tremendous instrumental value. The trip to Pottersville helps us see the good that George is responsible for. This is what makes his life meaningful, not the intrinsic value of the activity of bookkeeping. The good cause account of the meaning of life is superior to Wielenberg's theory, since it appropriately includes the goods that make George's life meaningful. Wielenberg's theory fails because it is underinclusive.

In reply, Wielenberg might complain that I haven't so much as raised an objection to his theory of the meaning of life as I have offered a theory of a different type of meaning. He proposes a distinction between two types of meaning: external meaning and internal meaning.<sup>47</sup> As he defines it, external meaning is a matter of how much good one brings into the universe. In

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<sup>45</sup> Wielenberg (2005).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> He includes a third—"supernatural meaning." I'm not entirely sure that he thinks of this as different type, since he calls them "interpretations."

contrast, for a life to have internal meaning is “for it to be good for the person who lives it and for it to include an activity that is worthwhile.”<sup>48</sup> His theory is a theory of internal meaning. It is somewhat unclear if this notion includes a subjective condition, but it appears to. This is why I said earlier that it might be best described as a hybrid theory. Either way, Wielenberg intends the notion to capture something of importance. He says that internal meaning is what we want when we want to do something with our lives. Since he only intends to offer a theory of internal meaning, he might claim that my objection misses the target. I argue that his theory cannot account for the goods that contribute to external meaning, but this is not an objection to his theory, since it is merely a theory of internal meaning.

Perhaps Wielenberg has captured an important, distinctive kind of meaning. I am not so sure. I see no clear motivation for distinguishing between internal and external meaning. Regardless, I do not think that the notion of internal meaning captures what we want when we want to live a meaningful life. Like hybrid theories it blurs fulfillment and meaning. Yes, we want to be fulfilled and we want our fulfillment to be fitting. That is, we want our lives to be meaningful. I offer a theory of what makes a life meaningful. The good cause account explains, in part, what makes fulfillment appropriate. It is not the mere engagement in intrinsically valuable activities. Rather, a life is meaningful in so far as one is responsible for goodness. As a variety of plausible examples show, one can live a meaningful life by engaging in activities that are only instrumentally valuable. Hence, the good cause account is a superior notion of the meaning of life. It tracks what is of importance. It is in better accord with our everyday talk of meaning. If it is not a theory of internal meaning, then so much for the notion of internal meaning.

## 6. OBJECTIONS

Although the good cause account of the meaning of life is compelling, it is not entirely intuitive. A clean distinction between fulfillment and meaning helps account for certain patterns of usage, but the purely objectivist theory is not entirely non-revisionist. As a result, the GCA appears to have highly implausible implications. In this section I turn to address seven problems for the GCA. I deal with the most pressing problems first.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Wielenberg (2005, 15).

<sup>49</sup> Apart from the first and the last objections, these do not appear in the current literature. And there is no reply to the first objection in the literature.

### 6.1 *Sisyphus and the Vultures*

The good cause account is a purely objectivist theory. It holds that there are no subjective conditions on the meaning of life. But one might worry that purely objectivist theories have strange results. In defense of the subjective condition of her hybrid theory, Wolf asks us to imagine a slight variation on the original Sisyphus myth: imagine that unbeknownst to Sisyphus, his daily rock rolling scares off angry vultures that would have otherwise decimated a small village. In this scenario his life has good results.<sup>50</sup> The GCA would say that Wolf's Sisyphus leads a meaningful life. But clearly he does not. So, the objection concludes, we should reject the theory.<sup>51</sup>

If the best, most precise, notion of the GCA includes accidental outcomes in the calculation of the meaning of life, as I think it should, then the objection is right that the GCA implies that Sisyphus's life would be at least somewhat meaningful. If his rock rolling prevents horrid vultures from spreading a disease or stealing the young children from a vulnerable town, his rock rolling is tremendously instrumentally good. Alternatively, if his rock rolling merely amuses the townsfolk, then, here too, his rock rolling would be somewhat good. Perhaps, if the amusement was great enough, if the resulting mirth prevented a rash of suicides, the value of Sisyphus's toil would likely cross the threshold of meaningfulness. Yes, the theory has this implication. But I do not see the problem. Surely the good effects would make his life meaningful in this regard. Since the good effects are not achieved intentionally, his actions lack achievement value. But this does not mean there is no value to be found.<sup>52</sup>

Frankl asks us to imagine an ape that is punctured repeatedly in order to manufacture a life saving serum.<sup>53</sup> The ape cannot hope to understand the significance of its life. There is nothing we can say to make it understand. But its life is indeed meaningful. Hundreds of people are saved as a result. Perhaps, Frankl suggests, much of our suffering is like this. It serves a purpose in the larger scheme of things, but like the medical ape, there is no way in which we can be made to understand our role.

I think that there is much wrong with this analogy. For starters, it provides little comfort. If God were akin to human medical researchers in both his inability to explain the purpose of our suffering and his inability to achieve a desired outcome without causing tremendous suffering, then God would be

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<sup>50</sup> Wolf (2010b, 21, 38).

<sup>51</sup> Brogaard and Smith (2005, 444, 447) briefly present a similar example, that of a Forrest Gump type who accidentally causes lots of good.

<sup>52</sup> In a survey article, Metz (2007, 206) briefly questions whether one must love the object of worth.

<sup>53</sup> Frankl (1959, 134).



so deficient as to be unworthy of worship. But this is beside the point. Perhaps our suffering does serve a larger purpose, perhaps not. I will put this aside. What matters is whether we are indeed causally responsible for significant good. If so, our lives are meaningful. The medical ape shows us this much.

As with the medical ape, if Sisyphus were to learn that his life had this kind of instrumental value, he could appropriately take some solace in this fact. Nevertheless, if he were at all normal, it is not clear that he would feel fulfilled rolling his rock. His activity is too simple, too repetitive, and not sufficiently intellectually engaging to be fulfilling. Rock rolling is not the kind of thing that psychologically normal people can find very satisfying. But this does not show that the good cause account is wrong as a theory of the meaning of life. No, it merely shows that fulfillment requires a more complex kind of engagement than rock rolling, whatever the consequences might be. The lesson is just this: merely knowing that one's actions have value does not make them satisfying to perform. Wouldn't housework be better if it did!

The mere fact that one's life is meaningful to some extent does not show that all things considered it is worth living, nor does the fact that a life is high in happiness, fulfillment, aesthetic value, perfection, or moral worth.<sup>54</sup> Surely these all contribute, but there is no guarantee that any amount of one dimension of value will be sufficient to make a life one where someone, given a synoptic preview of the life to come, would choose to be born.<sup>55</sup> I suspect that Wolf's Sisyphus would refuse. Meaning is important, but it is not all that matters. It is not the only thing that makes a life worth living.

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<sup>54</sup> There is next to no literature making the distinction between what makes a life worthwhile and what makes a life meaningful. Young (2003, 5) for instance, sees worth as a matter of meaning. Trisel (2007) provides the only sustained discussion of the distinction. Apart from this, Metz (2007, 213) briefly notes the difference, and Metz (2002, 788, n.10) mentions it. Blumenfeld (2009, 8, n.2) seconds Metz's suggestion. Haack (2001) proposes that we ditch the concept of meaning for worth. She does not explain the conceptual difference. Wollheim (1984, 444–8) proposes a distinction between a life worth living and a worthwhile life. I decline adopting this terminology, since there is better, more familiar conceptual machinery: his distinction closely tracks that between welfare and meaning. Other commentators, such as Wolf (2010b), understandably interchange concepts such as "the good life," (12, 52, and 118) a life that would seem a benefit (21, 23, and 27), the "fully successful life" (32), the "fully flourishing life" (12), and the life good for the one who lives it (32). Since she thinks that the notion is different from self-interest (56, 63, and 116) and happiness (109), it appears that we might have in mind a similar notion. By "the good life" Hurka (2011) seems to have in mind a life worth living. He too defends an objective list account. Haybron (2010, 38) refers to "the good life" as "a choiceworthy life on the whole." Here I will avoid the vexed term "the good life," since some, such as Feldman (2006), use it to refer to a life high in individual welfare, though this usage is aberrant. Baier (1997, 67–9) makes a few passing remarks on worth. McDermott (1991) and Harries (1991) putatively discuss worth, and both are cited as making a contribution to the literature, but neither addresses the topic.

<sup>55</sup> Smilansky (1997) objects to the pre-existence test for the worth of a life.

### 6.2 *The Objection from Vicious Incompetence*

One could accept my claim that the accidental good effects of one's actions contribute to the meaning of one's life, but object to a closely related implication of the GCA. Consider an extremely vicious person who is equally as incompetent as he is malevolent. He spends most of his time trying to hurt people and destroy beautiful things. Perhaps he has heard of the GCA and is intentionally trying to live a meaningless life. But he is horribly inept. Rather than pain and suffering, his actions inadvertently lead to good, lots of it. Accordingly, the GCA implies that he leads a very meaningful life. This is highly counter-intuitive. It gives us good reason to reject the GCA.

Although troublesome, I think that this objection fails. I offer three reasons for thinking that the GCA survives unscathed. First, the GCA does not imply that the viciously incompetent person lives a very meaningful life. Although the person causes a lot of good, his actions are also morally hideously. The GCA factors in the moral worth of his actions. And the moral worth is negative. I do not have an algorithm to offer, but the moral disvalue would plausibly outweigh the value of the resulting good in many cases.

Second, if we consider a scenario where the viciously incompetent person accidentally saves the lives of a few million people, say by inadvertently aiding the assassination of a genocidal maniac, then the situation is different. Regardless of whether the GCA factors in the moral worth of one's actions, here we would want to say that the incompetent person accidentally lived a meaningful life. After all, he helped save the lives of millions! The GCA gives the right answer in both cases.

Third, consider an inversion of the objection: imagine an incompetent person who tries to do good but fails. She believes in the curative power of leaches and devotes her entire life to growing leaches and administering them to the sick. Unfortunately, she does a tremendous amount of harm. She wants to live a meaningful life, but fails. The moral worth of her actions is likely outweighed by the suffering she inflicts on the poor and dying. The GCA can account for this result. She lives a meaningless life despite her good intentions. I see no reason to deny that the same kinds of considerations apply to the incompetent do-gooder as to the evil-doer.

### 6.3 *The Objection from External Meaning*

Earlier, I dismissed a worry that we should be principally concerned with what Wielenberg calls "internal meaning." But one might argue that I have offered an implausible theory of "external meaning." Although there is little value in the distinction, one might worry that the good cause account is over-inclusive. It counts far too much as contributing to the meaning of one's life.

Perhaps the best way at the objection is once again through a familiar fictional example—*It's a Wonderful Life*. Consider the pivotal episode of the film, George's waking nightmare visit to Pottersville. Imagine that instead of the dystopic Pottersville—the capitalist nightmare where everything is for sale—the world without George were far better than the actual world.<sup>56</sup> His mother had a different son some years later who struck it rich and used his fortune to invest in Bedford Falls and its people. George's wife married a man a bit less grumpy and far less prone to gloomy spells. She appears to be far happier in her alternate life. George's cab driver friend, Ernie was given a lower interest loan by another bank and uses the extra money to send his child to college. And so on. . . . Given a glimpse of this alternate universe, what would George think? There is no mystery: he would surely head for the first bridge. No responsible angel would allow suicidal George to see this world!

The inverted trip to Pottersville helps put the problem in focus. It shows that the meaning of life is indeed a factor of the good one is responsible for, but the good only includes the difference in value between the actual world and the nearest possible world where you did not exist. This notion closely tracks Wielenberg's notion of external meaning: "When a life has external meaning in this sense, the universe is better than it would have been had the life not have been lived."<sup>57</sup> He asks us to imagine a life much like the inverted Pottersville, where had one not existed, the exact same good would have resulted from someone else's actions.<sup>58</sup> In such a case, he argues, one's life lacks external meaning. Since the GCA suggests otherwise, we should reject it for being wildly over-inclusive.

Although *It's a Wonderful Life* seems to suggest a theory of this sort, and Wielenberg thinks it deserves a separate category of meaning, I am not convinced that external meaning tracks anything of importance. I do not think that it deserves a separate category of meaning, and I do not think it tracks what we want when we want to live a meaningful life. If people sometimes have this in mind, they are mistaken to be worried about their counter-factual contribution. The theory of external meaning fails as a theory of the meaning of life for the same reason that counter-factual theories of causation fail—they cannot account for cases of causal over-determination.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Some think that Pottersville might just be far more desirable than Bedford Falls. See Kamiya's (2001) tongue-in-cheek account.

<sup>57</sup> Wielenberg (2005, 15).

<sup>58</sup> Wolf (2011) offers a "robust sense of good for" that is roughly equivalent to external meaning. What we are robustly good for is the good that would not have been had we not been.

<sup>59</sup> Counterfactual theories of causation hold that C causes E iff had C not occurred, then E would not have occurred. Such theories fail when there are redundant causes. Imagine that there was a backup shooter on the grassy knoll. Had Oswald not shot JFK, the backup would

To see why, consider a life of tremendous anti-meaning, such as that of Hitler.

Hitler's life has a high degree of negative meaning. It is the opposite of meaningful. Most plausibly it saps one's life of positive meaning to be responsible for killing and tormenting millions of people.<sup>60</sup> Horrendously evil lives lack meaning. And Hitler's life was horrendously evil. Here is the problem: imagine that one day Hitler did something good: he gave a hot meal to a hungry homeless child. It might be the case that in the nearest possible world where Hitler did not exist, someone else rose to power in the Nazi party and carried out its genocidal mission with equal vigor and effectiveness. In such a case, the only difference between our world and the world where Hitler did not exist might be that the homeless child did not receive a hot meal. The difference in value between the actual world and this alternate universe is positive—a hot meal for a hungry homeless child. In such a case, the counterfactual based theory of external meaning implies that Hitler led a meaningful life. This is absurd. Hitler led a horrendously evil life of no positive meaning. We should reject the theory of external meaning and the Pottersville refinement for suggesting that it could be otherwise.

However, one might object, if there is nothing to the Pottersville refinement, then why would we expect George to be upset? Why would any angel worth his wings keep George away from the alternate universe? There is at least one good reason. One thing that the original trip to Pottersville did well is set George's contribution in relief. It made all the good that he was responsible for clear. However, a trip to the happier world would do the opposite. It would mask the good he is responsible for and, worse, it might highlight the bad. This certainly would not help make George see how much value he was responsible for. It would do nothing but upset him. Of course we should keep him away.

Further, since George cared for his mother, his wife, and the townsfolk, he might be tempted to wish himself never born if they would have been better off without him. However, I see no reason to think that the counterfactual difference erases George's actual contribution to the real world.<sup>61</sup> His life was meaningful in the actual world, even though the world would have been better had he not existed. The example of Hitler makes this clear for negative meaning. The world might have been worse without him, but this would not

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have. The problem is this: if there was a backup and Oswald went through with the assassination, counter-factual theories incorrectly imply that Oswald did not cause JFK's death. Since had he not shot JFK, he would have died anyway.

<sup>60</sup> For other horrendous evils, see Adams (2003).

<sup>61</sup> Ignore the fact that George is a fictional character. By actual world, I mean the fictional world of the actual story.

mean that he lived a meaningful life. I see no reason to think the situation is any different for positive meaning. We should eschew any concerns about external meaning.

#### 6.4 *The Objection from Endless Repetition*

If one could live one's life over again the exact same way, then one could be causally responsible for twice as much good. Three times, thrice as much, and so on. Hence, according to the GCA, reliving one's life would make it more meaningful. But it is a hallmark of meaningless activities that they lead nowhere. This is the driving intuition behind the original Sisyphus myth. Living one's life over again is to live a meaningless life. It is as meaningless as rowing in place. The GCA gets this wrong.

This objection raises a host of difficult problems, but I do not see a clear objection to the GCA. For starters, it is simply not clear that we should consider a span of lives as involving the same person. I see no reason to think that reincarnation is coherent on any plausible theory of personal identity. But there is no need to rest the case on such a controversial reply.

Second, the good cause account is a theory of the meaning of a life, not a theory of the meaning of a span of lives. If a span of identical lives should be considered meaningless, this has no direct implications for the good cause account. The more pointed question is whether a life is meaningless if someone else lived a very similar life in the past. Here, I simply do not see why it would be. If it was good to help the needy thousands of years ago, then it is good now. If it was good to compose a beautiful song a hundred thousand years ago, then it would be good to compose the same song now. Not only is a beautiful song a good thing, the act of composing has achievement value. It might not be historically unique, but, most plausibly, achievement value is largely a factor of psychological uniqueness. Of course, these issues are complicated. For the purposes of a reply, we need not work out a theory of achievement value. We merely need to note that what was good to do once is often good to do again.

In reply, one might press the objection slightly differently. If the idea of living one's entire life over again raises concerns about personal identity, then simply consider an immortal with recurrent amnesia. Such an immortal could conceivably repeat much of what he had already done. He might be causally responsible for more good, but we certainly do not think that such a life would be meaningful.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Smuts (2011) addresses the issue. Fischer (1999) suggests that amnesia might be a solution to the putative problems with immortality.

The case of the immortal with recurrent amnesia is complicated. First of all, it is not clear that identity survives radical amnesia. But we can put this aside. The example also raises hard questions about the value of immortality. However, it does not present a problem for the good cause account. Much of what such an immortal might do would surely contribute to the meaning of his or her life. Helping others would still be good post-amnesia. Why wouldn't it? However, if such an immortal endlessly composed the same novel, we might worry that the life would be less valuable as a result. Most plausibly, it would have less achievement value. We do not need a theory of achievement value to see that this is the case. This is a core datum that any plausible theory must respect. Since the good cause account factors in achievement value, it handles the case of the immortal with amnesia.

One further point is worth making in defense of the GCA. As noted above, although Sisyphus and the vultures might live a meaningful life, his life is not worth living. Meaning is not all that matters. Similarly, an immortal with recurrent amnesia might not live a life worth living. There seems to be something very problematic about endlessly repeating oneself. Most plausibly, it makes a life less worth living. I am not sure this is right. But we need not settle the issue here. What is important for our purposes is that the prospect of a life of endless repetition does not pose a problem for the good cause account.

### 6.5 *The Objection from the Results Machine*

Nozick asks us to imagine a "results machine, which produces in the world any result you would produce."<sup>63</sup> Given access to a results machine, one could bring about much good. Although one would be causally responsible for the good, it would not contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life. Since the GCA suggests otherwise, the objection concludes, we should reject the GCA.

This objection fails for two reasons. First, it is not clear that one would be causally responsible for the results of the results machine, at least not in any meaningful sense. We need to learn more about how the machine works. For instance, how could the results machine produce a novel? Was it scripted by the creators? If so, it would appear that the creators of the results machine wrote the novel. By pressing the button one might play a causal role in the process, much like the presence of oxygen plays in arson. But it's not clear that this is the cause we are after when we want to know why our house went up in flames.

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<sup>63</sup> Nozick (1974, 44).

Since the first reply is mired in the complexities of causation, I will not rest my case there. There is a second problem with the results machine example: the results cannot redound to our honor, since they lack achievement value. Achievement is largely a factor of difficulty for the agent. And pressing a button is not typically very difficult. Since the GCA factors in the achievement value of a life, it explains the deficiency in meaning.

However, if the results machine could be activated only through great effort and at risk of significant peril, pressing the button would indeed be an achievement. For instance, suppose that the button was like that found in the movie *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1990)—the on switch to an ancient alien invention that would oxygenate the atmosphere of Mars. Pressing the button would liberate those in the oxygen-deprived slums from their tyrannical, corporate overlord. Surely, pressing this button would contribute to the meaning of one's life.

### 6.6 *The Lassie Objection*

The good cause account holds that a life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good. Since the theory does not make reference to any subjective states, it lacks the resources to exclude animals. The GCA implies that Lassie lived a meaningful life. But this is absurd. Animals cannot live meaningful lives. Neither Taylor's subjective theory nor Wolf's hybrid view has this implication. Lassie might be responsible for lots of good. But Lassie could not be fulfilled, at least not in the way a person can be fulfilled. The GCA gets the case of Lassie wrong.

As formulated, the good cause account does indeed imply that animals can live meaningful lives. But I do not see the problem. Why can't an animal live a meaningful life? Surely, if there were an actual dog like Lassie, it would live a meaningful life. Frankl, and presumably millions of his readers, did not balk at the controversial suggestion that the medical ape lived a somewhat meaningful life. Whether Frankl is right about the ape is far less clear than a similar claim about Lassie, but the controversy does not stem from the fact that the ape is not human. I see no reason to be speciesist about meaning.

### 6.7 *The Objection from Nihilism*

Earlier, in the discussion of hybrid theories of the meaning of life, I raised an objection to the objective condition. The objection concerns the very plausibility of objective value. As with hybrid theories, nihilists will have significant concerns about the good cause account. It has strong meta-ethical commitments to value realism. Indeed, I assume that there is objective value in the universe. But it is out of scope to defend stark raving realism here. I will

merely note that I see no compelling reasons to take nihilism seriously. Nothing more can be said in favor of objective value here. I acknowledge that the good cause account is off the table for nihilists. So be it.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I defend an objectivist theory of the meaning of life. The theory holds that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it is causally responsible for good. Accordingly, I call it the good cause account (GCA) of the meaning of life. I argue that the good effects that count towards the meaning of one's life need not be intentional. Nor must one be aware of the effects. Nor does it matter whether the same good would have resulted if one had not existed. What matters is that one is causally responsible for the good.

I argue that the GCA is superior to both subjectivist and hybrid theories of the meaning of life. Subjectivist theories of the meaning of life hold that meaning is entirely constituted by one's subjective states. Most commonly, subjectivist theories hold that meaning is entirely a matter of fulfillment. Taylor defends such a theory. The central problem with subjectivist theories is that they incorrectly imply that a life devoted to curing cancer in the experience machine is more meaningful than a similar, but less satisfying, life lived in the real world. Since this is not the case, fulfillment is not sufficient for meaning.

Hybrid theories hold that there are both necessary subjective conditions and necessary objective conditions for meaningfulness. Wolf offers hybrid theory called the "fitting fulfillment view." It holds that meaning arises from active engagement in projects of worth. I argue that the hybrid theory incorrectly implies that lives are meaningless unless one is fulfilled, but this is not the case. One can live a highly meaningful, yet dissatisfied life. Hence, fulfillment is not necessary for meaning.

The good cause account does not imply that fulfillment is sufficient or even necessary for meaning. It is an objectivist theory. It holds that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good. The GCA does not imply that a fulfilled life in the experience machine is more meaningful than a less fulfilled life outside the machine. Nor does it imply that a causally good life high in moral worth and achievement value is meaningless if the person is dissatisfied. No, the GCA distinguishes between significance and fulfillment. In this way, it both avoids the problems of its subjectivist and hybrid rivals and it better tracks normal usage.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> I thank Chris Grau for commenting on a previous version of this paper.



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